



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 4 (B)

#### The Good Shepherd

[RCL] Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

The word “shepherd” comes through strongly this morning. We hear the word a total of seven times, and it’s a familiar image – Jesus as a shepherd is frequently depicted in scripture and art. Psalm 23 is the most familiar psalm, with people often turning to it for comfort at a funeral. And yet, though we hear about Jesus, the good shepherd, laying down his life for us, his sheep – do we really even know what that means?

Most of us don’t regularly interact with sheep – certainly not as often as those who lived in Jesus’ time. When we conjure the image, it’s likely one of a clean, light-skinned Jesus dressed in a white robe, carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Perhaps the image is comforting, but I have to wonder -- is that what Jesus meant for us to think of?

The reality of sheep is quite different than the dream of them. For example – sheep are not easy to train. They are simple, gentle spirits who scare easily. They love to rub their bodies against the sides of fences when they are shedding, leaving clumps of wool behind. There are often a few internal leaders in a herd – but the majority of sheep are happy to follow. Their depth perception isn’t very good – so they often have to rely on someone showing them the way through a gate. Most of the time they’re quiet, with a few contented bleats – but if you’ve caught them, and they don’t want to be caught, they *scream*. Maybe you’ve heard that once or twice in your life. If you haven’t, rest assured that the volume is surprising!

The picture we have in our minds of Jesus as the good shepherd often inadvertently paints us as being good sheep, somehow. When Jesus is depicted carrying a lamb on his shoulders, I think it is likely that the lamb is bleating for dear life – perhaps even wriggling around, trying to get free. Maybe if we’re honest with ourselves, we might find that closer to our own experiences, too. Maybe you like to believe that when Jesus carries you, you are well-behaved and soft – that you know God knows better than you do, and you’re willing to let go of control and allow God to work. In reality, though, perhaps all of us bleat and wriggle a whole lot, finding it hard to give up control.

Though we know Jesus is the good shepherd, it can still be hard for us to fully trust him. All of the trite little phrases – “Let go and let God!” or “Jesus, take the wheel!” – might be easy to say, but they are not easy to do.

Another idea that comes up in a multitude of places in this morning's readings is that of laying down one's life. In 1 John, John writes, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The reading goes on, but let's just stay with that for a moment – let it sink in. We ought to lay down our lives for one another. Now, when we read that, sometimes it sounds like John is asking us to be willing to die for one another. After all, that's what Jesus did. He laid down his life on the cross. But when we look at that idea expansively, we might find more opportunities to figuratively lay down our lives.

We lay down our lives when we put someone else's needs above our own. When we stay up late to help a kid with their homework, or cook a meal for the family, even if we're not that hungry. We lay down our lives when we say "yes" to service in some way, giving our time to a good cause. We lay down our lives, finally, when we give up control, when we stop wriggling and bleating and, instead, relax, trusting that God is taking us to a good, green pasture, that God is leading us beside still waters.

Laying down our lives is hard because it challenges our sense of ego. It requires us to know our place as the sheep, not the shepherd. Sometimes, when we ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" we put ourselves on par with God – forgetting that God is God and that we are not. We forget that God is *good* beyond our imagining, *kind* beyond our understanding, instead making the mistake of demystifying God, when sometimes being in awe of the mysterious Divine keeps us humble in our faith.

When Jesus lays down his life for us, He is *full* of humble service. The good shepherd doesn't fight off the attackers; he doesn't lock the sheep away, so as not to be harmed. The good shepherd travels alongside us, willing to accompany us, to lay down and behave like us, to face death, just so we would know we are not alone. Our shepherd is good, even though we might not be. We are sheep – neither fully good nor fully bad. Perhaps annoying at times, perhaps simple at times. But who *we are* pales in comparison to who *God is*.

Jesus is the good shepherd, and we are the sheep. We lay down our lives when we live into that relationship, when we trust that our shepherd sees things we do not, and knows things we do not, and has foresight that we do not. Our invitation this morning is, perhaps, to lay down those burdens we have been carrying, to lay down our lives, to remember that Jesus is our good shepherd, and we are all just sheep.

Revise that image you have of Jesus carrying the lamb on his shoulders and replace it with you. This morning, be assured that Jesus *is* carrying us – carrying you – on his own shoulders. May that knowledge – may that *assurance* be a blessing. Amen.

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